

HR Corner

House blend combines subtlety and enthusiasm by Charles Mak



Thomas Hahn
general manager
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(Hong Kong) Ltd
Photo: Wallace Chan

Corporate social responsibility more than a marketing vehicle

Today's companies are making corporate social responsibility (CSR) an integral part of their corporate visions, missions and values. Given the attention the consumer now pays to issues such as sustainable development, they can't afford not to. For Starbucks Coffee Hong Kong however, it is more than just good marketing — the company is taking the initiative to contribute to society while helping employees maintain a balanced lifestyle.

According to Thomas Hahn, general manager, Coffee Concepts (Hong Kong) Ltd, an authorised licensee of Starbucks, the company's CSR initiatives are central to Starbucks' way of being, fitting in with its three distinctive though often overlapping areas of concern: environmental protection, arts and culture, education and youth.

As part of a vast global network, Starbucks' Greater China region support centre communicates with its US headquarters on CSR matters. However, it does have some freedom in the way it interprets company policies, giving the Hong Kong operation a flexible CSR platform.

"Based on headquarters' guiding principles, we focus on activities that are relevant to local needs and contexts," Mr Hahn explains.

"Good business practice goes well beyond the notion of making a profit. At the end of the day, it's the spirit that counts — one that motivates us to give back to the community where we live, work and play."

No boundaries

Starbucks prides itself on its CSR credentials. In Hong Kong, under the company's "reduce, reuse and recycle" policy Starbucks provides reusable cutlery and coffee cups to discourage paper product waste. Further, a cash rebate of HK\$3 per cup is offered to customers who bring their own mugs to the store.

Extending these green concepts to the wider community, Starbucks organises an array of activities including the recent "Loving Green Going Green" essay competition, which attracted more than 4,000 entries from students across Hong Kong, and a tree planting day at Fung Yuen butterfly reserve for young children and their families.

"We make the effort, not the noise"

Mr Hahn says Starbucks' commitment to Hong Kong is long term and as such it also pays

special attention to youth development in the city. "A well developed society needs young and responsible people to facilitate healthy and sustainable growth," he notes.

Last Christmas, Starbucks joined forces with the Hong Kong Federation of Youth for a series of activities reaching out to young people in society. On this occasion and many others like it, Starbucks partners met with young people from diverse backgrounds so they could chat and learn from each other's experience. "Working alongside social workers helps hone our communications skills," Mr Hahn adds.

Bryan Chan, store manager of Starbucks' Happy Valley branch, believes the days are worthwhile. "They give us a better understanding of the society we live in," he says.

Mr Hahn points out that CSR can take many forms and is not restricted to any physical limitations. For instance, the jazz music playing in the background of all Starbucks stores promotes arts and culture. This constitutes a major component of the "Starbucks experience", creating a comfortable atmosphere for customers in various ways. To support local musicians, the company sponsors rising talents to perform in an array of cultural events, and also sponsors jazz concerts, the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Hong Kong International Film Festival.

Engaging ambience

Promoting or advertising its charitable ways has never been Starbucks' style, Mr Hahn stresses. "We make the effort, not the noise," he says. "It's just the way we are. For instance, to recruit volunteers we simply engage our partners who in turn engage customers via everyday interaction, as well as their friends and families. This particular practice adheres to our guiding principles and best reflects our brand philosophy."

Such inherent subtlety also allows the company to refrain from following typical marketing standards, instead encouraging wholehearted concentration on issues that matter.

"One of the major objectives we aim to achieve in all our CSR initiatives is staff engagement," Mr Hahn explains. "We specifically inculcate volunteerism because it helps boost confidence, build loyalty, create synergy and foster mutual respect."

Moreover, partners' suggestions are applauded during management meetings at both store and district levels. They can also email ideas direct to the HR department or to Mr Hahn via the company's two unique communication channels "PartnerVoice" and "AskThomas". In doing so partners are guaranteed a 48-hour response to any suggestion or comment, and these are subsequently consolidated and posted on the notice board at each Starbucks store on a quarterly basis.

A recent in-house CSR survey was also carried out to attain partners' orientations towards charity work. "The response was overwhelming," Mr Hahn says. "Our partners have shown great enthusiasm and this will be translated into practice."

Salient points

- CSR platform allows flexibility
- Staff engagement a focal point

- Volunteerism encouraged
- Communication channels obtain staff suggestions and comments

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